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SUBJECT: MALAWI POLITICAL PARTIES LAG IN DEMOCRATIC
DEVELOPMENT

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[C](#). LILONGWE 358
[D](#). LILONGWE 44

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[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Malawi's recent elections were hailed by both international and domestic observers as credible and peaceful. Voters broke from historic regional voting patterns to give a landslide victory to President Mutharika's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Malawian political parties, already struggling to track party membership, raise and effectively use funds, create issues-based platforms, and deliver constituent services, were caught unawares of the shifts in voter behavior. Major opposition parties such as the United Democratic Front (UDF) are critically reexamining their processes and letting new leaders emerge, while the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) has devolved into a leadership struggle over the need for greater transparency and internal democracy. Even the victorious DPP is not immune, as the party attempts to deal with returning party loyalists who were forced to contest as independents due to flawed primaries. With all parties trying to adapt to the new dynamics of the paradigm-shifting election, now is an ideal time for a focused assistance program on political party development. Comment: The move away from "big man," regionally-based politics has begun. We should facilitate parties' efforts to become more issues-based, transparent in their operations, and responsive to constituent demands. End Summary.

Election Alters Political Realities

[1](#)2. (SBU) International observers and domestic monitors hailed Malawi's recent elections as peaceful and credible. While observers noted shortcomings regarding abuse of State media and use of government funds for campaigning, the election still marked a significant step forward in Malawi's democratic development. The results, a landslide victory for President Mutharika and a super-majority in Parliament for his DPP party, shocked analysts (ref A, B) and led civil society groups to voice concerns about the future viability of opposition political parties.

[1](#)3. (SBU) The UDF, one of the two major opposition parties, has already begun to turn to a new generation of leaders who are reexamining the party's long-term plans. The other major opposition party, the MCP, is in the middle of an election defeat-spawned power struggle between party president John Tembo and party spokesman Ishmael Chafukira after Chafukira called on the MCP to become transparent and promote internal democracy to survive (ref C). Even the victorious DPP has not been immune to party problems. Many of its flawed

primary losers who won victory in the general elections as independents have attempted to reclaim their places in the party, causing internal debate about the need for improved intra-party democracy. President Mutharika has publicly stated the DPP must become more transparent and improve its primary system before the next election.

Many Long-standing Party Issues

14. (SBU) For all parties, the major issues are similar and long-standing. Due to lingering suspicion from the days of former dictator Kamuzu Banda, none of the parties have a system in place to register members or track membership. Without membership rolls, internal administrative processes from local committee formation to national party conventions, become dispute-filled affairs. Top leaders dictate who is a "true" party member and who is masquerading. As seen in last elections' primaries, the important process of selecting candidates further exaggerates these weaknesses leading to internal rigging and corruption and imposed candidates (ref D). These problems can be even greater for smaller parties without long histories to help verify true supporters.

15. (SBU) Fundraising is another hurdle for parties. Traditionally, parliamentary candidates have self-funded their campaigns, although while in power, the DPP and UDF both liberally used state resources to help candidates. Presidential candidates have used the bulk of party resources on their own campaigns, which require comparatively greater resources. The lack of party financial support isolates parliamentary candidates and reduces loyalty. With no mechanism to raise even small contributions from party supporters, most parties seek out large domestic donors or try to raise funds from the Malawi Diaspora. These

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contributions are privately made and parties are not required to document their sources or amounts of funds nor transparently account for party expenditures. This environment leads to frequent disputes and distrust.

16. (SBU) Until the recent elections, most party leaders believed they had an inherent regional support base that could not be swayed. These beliefs, supported by historic trends, led to neopatrimonial parties with "big man" leaders. Leaders promoted obedience within parties, limiting internal democratic mechanisms. In this environment, many dissenters created new splinter parties, slowly eroding support. To rise within a party, it also became more important to please the leader than to provide service to constituents. Moreover, this brand of personality-driven politics suffocated organic attempts to form ideological differences that could differentiate parties.

An Ideal Time to Help

17. (SBU) Comment: The recent elections forced Malawi's political parties to rethink their strategies, methods, and reasons for existence. All of the major parties, with the possible exception of John Tembo, are actively seeking to improve party mechanisms to promote internal democracy and constituent services. Even within Tembo's MCP own faction, the need for change is clear (septel). The election's outcome is also slowly revealing Malawi's next generation of party leaders, a generation that did not spend its formative years as part of the government of a one-party state. Since an earlier USAID-supported political party strengthening program ended in the early part of this decade, there has been little done in the sector. Currently, only the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy has a program, and it concentrates on inter-party dialogue between parties represented in Parliament. The current political environment in Malawi offers a rare moment when most, if not all, major parties would be receptive to institutionalizing democratic

reforms. DFID is interested in possible cooperation in the sector on a new long-range program. USG support would allow us to leverage the inherent strength of organizations like the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute to entrench democratic ideals at the party level that will ultimately carryover and strengthen Malawi's national institutions.

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